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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 GUATEMALA 002331

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SNAR](#) [ELAB](#) [PHUM](#) [ETRD](#) [GT](#) [BZ](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S SEPTEMBER 8TH MEETING WITH PRESIDENT  
PORTILLO

REF: GUATEMALA 2080

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN R. HAMILTON, EMBASSY GUATEMALA, REASON:  
1.5 (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: President Portillo says he fired number two in the army General Rios Sosa (Rios Montt's son) for disobeying orders to use the military to restore public order during the FRG violent protests July 24 and for lending military resources to the FRG campaign. He has Rios Montt's support to fix a flawed bill establishing the civilian entity (the SAAS) that will replace the presidential military security service (EMP). He thinks Rios Montt is doing far better than (opposition-funded) polls show, but that he will lose to current front-runner Oscar Berger in a second round. Contrary to expectations, Portillo did not mention any interest in visiting Washington. End summary

Background:  
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12. (C) The Ambassador had phoned President Portillo September 2 to congratulate him for removing General Rios Sosa from the number two position in the Army. To the Ambassador's comment that it must have been a difficult decision, Portillo said it was, indeed, and offered to provide details in a private conversation. Owing to the President's travel and a bad cold he developed in Belize September 4, the follow-on meeting did not take place until September 8th, at the President's home.

Firing of Rios Sosa:  
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13. (C) The Ambassador started with the Rios Sosa topic, asking what had prompted the decision and its timing. Portillo said he had been determined to fire Rios Sosa after he disobeyed orders to use the military to restore public order during the FRG violent protests July 24-25. "Rios Sosa was confused as to whom he works for," Portillo said; "instead of me, he thought his commander in chief was his sister" (Second Vice President of the Congress Zury Rios, reportedly -- but not confirmed as -- the brains behind the FRG protests). Portillo said General Rios Montt is furious with him. "I've met with the General three times since the firing," Portillo said, "and he has not raised the subject once -- a sure sign that he is really ticked off; I know him well." In fact, Portillo said, the entire FRG was angry with him, but in firing Rios Sosa he had won no plaudits from the press or opposition. He had thus appreciated the Ambassador's call to express support, as "this job gets lonely." Portillo also volunteered that he had discovered that Army regional commander General Cruz, previously fired for using army resources to build a platform for an FRG political rally, had been acting under Rios Sosa orders. Portillo said he let a month go by after the July 24 riots, to remove the decision from the political debate. In passing, Portillo had high praise for Minister of Defense Moran, who "is loyal, consistently right on policy and who keeps me informed and consults with me on major decisions."

Confidence Building in Elections:  
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14. (C) The Ambassador said the removal of Rios Sosa was a major step toward restoring confidence that the elections would be free and fair, but cautioned that more presidential leadership would be required. He said the big challenge is to stem fear that there will be election-day violence, which arguably is being generated to keep the voter turnout low. A particularly scary rumor making the rounds, the Ambassador said, is that imprisoned gang leaders and members will be allowed to escape shortly before the elections. Mulling that one over, Portillo said he did not believe it but, at the same time, allowed that it was not impossible and that he would talk to Interior Minister Reyes Calderon about it. The Ambassador also encouraged him personally to publicize legal prohibitions on use of state resources for electoral purposes, mentioning that this was a concern of OAS election observation mission chief Paniagua (with whom the Ambassador had just met).

EMP Dismantling/SAAS Creation:  
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15. (C) The Ambassador asked about the current status of the

bill to create a civilian presidential security agency (the SAAS) to replace the military security service (EMP), which has been responsible over the years for so many human rights abuses. Portillo reaffirmed his intention to adhere to the timetable that dismantles the EMP by October 31 and said he had, earlier in the day, discussed the bill with General Rios Montt. The General had reviewed a memorandum on the subject prepared by Foreign Minister Gutierrez and had agreed with his arguments for further amendments, to fix troublesome changes introduced by FRG congressmen at the behest of army officers lobbying on their own account. If the changes were not made, Portillo reconfirmed his willingness to veto a bad law. Comment: This has been a major concern to us and to Guatemalan and international human rights groups.

Belize:  
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16. (C) The Ambassador commented that the public disavowal of the OAS facilitators' recommendation on Belize had been disappointing and asked what prompted it. Echoing what the British Ambassador said the Foreign Minister had told him, Portillo said it had been necessary to pre-emptively defend against a legal charge of treason that an opposition deputy had been preparing to bring against him. Portillo said he had had a good, private meeting with Belizean Prime Minister Said Musa, explaining the decision as necessitated by this threat. Portillo said Musa was understanding and was willing to look at concrete steps the two countries could take to convey the determination of both governments to handle the border dispute responsibly. Portillo is interested in creating a free zone along the border and increasing the hours of operation at a border crossing.

CICIACS:  
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17. (C) The Ambassador said we understand that the UN, which sent a technical mission to Guatemala in July to determine what was needed to set up an effective commission to study clandestine groups, may recommend major measures to give the commission legal "teeth" to do the job properly. For example, would the Portillo government and FRG be willing, if asked, to enact legal reforms to give the commission authority to use court-sanctioned telephone intercepts? Portillo indicated that he would look sympathetically on any well-reasoned recommendation and said he would be meeting on the subject in New York with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Labor Issues:  
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18. (C) The Ambassador briefed the President on his meeting, earlier in the day, with Attorney General Carlos De Leon on two specific labor issues: the still unresolved murder of labor leader Oswaldo Monzon and the incarceration on shaky legal grounds of labor leader Rigoberto Duenas. The Ambassador said that both issues would likely be invoked during a congressional debate on CAFTA. Portillo listened, asked a couple of clarifying questions, and said he would make a run at the Attorney General on the issue.

Narcotics:  
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19. (C) In a brief discussion of narcotics cooperation and the currently ongoing Mayan Jaguar joint operation, Portillo said he was expecting to receive shortly a report from Guatemalan military intelligence detailing how virtually every political party is receiving campaign contributions from narco-traffickers, the FRG included, he said. He promised the Ambassador a copy, but did not yet know what else he would do with the report.

Immigration Issues:  
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110. (C) He said he had fixed a problem on the border with El Salvador (wherein Guatemalan had literally withdrawn from a jointly operated port of entry) and commented that, again, it had been General Rios Sosa who had been at the source of the problem. He also commented that he had restored full authority to Immigration Director Oscar Contreras (who has been cooperative with us). Vice President Reyes Lopez had curtailed Contreras' authority during Portillo's trip abroad, to Taiwan. Comment: This is the second time in as many meetings that Portillo has complained about the Vice President.

Politics:  
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111. (C) On electoral politics, Portillo commented that FRG private polls (which he insisted have been professionally conducted to inform the FRG) shows Rios Montt running second, with 23 percent public support, to Bergers 32 percent. He

and Rios Montt had speculated together that the opposition, should the General win, will cite the public opinion polls (which in August put the General way back in fifth place, with single digit support) as indication of fraud. But Portillo does not think Rios Montt can beat Berger in a second round. Incidentally, Portillo said he had been favorably impressed by Berger's public comment that drug recertification was not a political issue and that it would be good for Guatemala. Comment: Most of the opposition hopes Guatemala will remain decertified.

Final:

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12. (C) Comment: Portillo was, as usual, relaxed, seemingly confident but appreciative of the Ambassador's support on the Rios Sosa issue. Surprisingly, Portillo did not mention any interest in visiting Washington.  
HAMILTON